

DOINGWHATWORKS



Presentation

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Connecting Peers, Including English Learners, to Improve Learning

April 2007

Topic: Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners

Practice: Schedule Peer Learning

Highlights

- Definition of peer assisted learning
- Benefits of peer assisted instruction and why it works
- Incorporate peer activities throughout the day to practice skills already taught
- How peer learning can support reading development across the grade levels
- Both partner activities and cooperative groups may be effective
- Suggestions for getting started with peer assisted instruction
- Topics to address in professional development on peer assisted learning.

Full Transcript

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Connecting Peers, Including English Learners, to Improve Learning

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Welcome to Mr. Allen's third grade reading group. Today, Mr. Allen has asked his students to read a story and discuss it, to demonstrate their understanding of what they've read. He has split his students into two groups. One group will read the story and discuss it with Mr. Allen. The other group is divided into pairs. *They* will discuss the story with each other. That's because Mr. Allen knows that pairing students gives them both practice in reading and language skills.

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He's using a technique called *Peer Assisted Learning*—an instructional method that pairs students who differ in reading ability or English proficiency to work together for about 90 minutes per week. Research shows that this simple technique can produce significant achievement results—not just for English learners, but for *all* students. Why?

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Working in paired activities gives students the opportunity to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses—and it also provides additional practice for both partners. Flexible use of partnering strategies allows all students to experience the satisfaction of working with others, and it reinforces important language and reading skills in the process.

That's the power of peer assisted instruction—it asks students to assume the responsibility of helping each other practice and improve their skills. But to reach that point, a bit of preparation is needed.

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First, the teacher should dedicate time for partner work on an ongoing basis. Research shows students get the most out of peer assisted learning when it's a part of the regular, weekly instructional routine. Three techniques will help paired activities go smoothly: First, model for students how to work in pairs. Then, make sure you preplan activities with student pairs in mind. And finally, be sure to create assignments that work best in peer situations. Let's look at each of these in more detail.

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As with any new activity, students need direction before they are able to work successfully in pairs. *Modeling* is a good way of showing students how to listen and respond to one another.

The teacher can also show students how to correct each other's work and provide appropriate feedback where needed. Planning out the skills partners will practice allows the teacher to provide guidelines that direct and focus student work. This kind of pre-practice instruction will help the peer teams perform with confidence. Remember that modeling activities should be an extension of lessons the teacher has already introduced. Choosing the right activity for peer learning is also important.

A wide range of activities will work, but the best activities are those that provide opportunities for students to practice skills. Examples include: discussing and writing out answers to questions about reading; practicing oral fluency; or playing games that require decoding. All of the above give students a chance to practice skills together, which makes them perfect candidates for pair activities.

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So, we've seen how well Mr. Allen plans for and implements peer assisted learning in his third grade class—but can it work at other grade levels too?

Yes, but there are specific issues to understand when using paired activities in different grade levels and curricula.

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For first graders, the teacher will need to use modeling to scaffold activities. She will need to demonstrate how she wants students to practice the assignment, perhaps taking the place of one student in the pair to show the class the intended activity.

First graders generally need help with phonemic awareness. So, it's a good idea to have them practice the first and last sounds of words. For example, have one student hold up a picture and ask the other student to name the picture, then isolate the first sound in the word and then the last sound. Students who master this activity can move on to more advanced practice-- like matching pictures that begin with the same sound.

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In the second grade, many students are solidifying their ability to accurately decode new words

as they read longer strings of text. To really master this skill, they will need practice “decoding” many new words. Let’s say, students are learning about long /a/ patterns. Pairs could warm up by sorting pictures to identify words with the long /a/. Then they can read the text with the teacher, highlighting the different types of long /a/ patterns. This way they get twice the practice, in two different contexts.

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Students in upper elementary spend a lot of time reading for comprehension—which makes these students great candidates for peer assisted learning. Here’s an example of how it could work: After reading a story, students might work in pairs to complete comprehension activities. They might use a graphic organizer to dissect key elements of a story, and then compare them to another story they read the week before.

Such rich, comprehension exercises provide great opportunities for 4th and 5th graders to help each other understand key concepts. While they work together to improve their skills, the organizer prepared by the teacher is structuring and scaffolding their work—providing a common instructional framework all students.

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Peer assisted activities can be incorporated throughout the day: in the core reading program, in other content areas, and in English language development—in any subject that requires practice. Once students learn the right routines, they are able to help each other learn in a variety of content areas.

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While research clearly shows peer learning works well for teams of two, additional evidence suggests larger groups of 4-6 students—sometimes called cooperative learning groups—can also benefit from peer learning. Any time students practice in structured, peer-to-peer activities, they benefit from the extra practice time *and* from sharing their understanding of key concepts.

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So, now that you understand the benefits of using peer learning activities—how do you get started? Here are some good places to seek support: Start by seeking guidance from the district or school

already experienced in managing peer learning activities. Learn from them about what works, and what doesn't. Professional development is another great way to learn about peer assisted instruction.

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For schools and districts planning professional development, here are some things teachers will need to know: For those teachers unfamiliar with peer learning, it's a good idea to model how peer activities are structured, how they play out, and how they relate to material the teacher has covered in class.

Teachers will need to learn how to establish routines that smooth transitions into and out of partner work. If they explicitly teach these routines to students, and set clear expectations for what it means to be a good partner, then peer learning is likely to go smoothly.

Teachers will also want to consider how they form partners. Good pairs don't just focus on the needs of the English learner—they're also made up of two students that "click" well, allowing both students to get a chance to practice key skills.

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Mr. Allen and other teachers who use peer assisted learning in their classrooms know that all students benefit from these strategies, especially English learners.

Research shows that connecting peers for learning strengthens student understanding of key concepts and improves language skills at the same time - and English learners need both to become better readers.

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To learn more about connecting peers for learning, including specific next steps, see the additional resources on this website.